

## H. Academy 721

### Chapter 721 164.3 - The Attack

Astron surged through the dense smoke, his legs powered by concentrated mana, every step a burst of speed. Irina lay silent across his shoulder, her weight insignificant compared to the oppressive suppression fields thickening the air. The din of chaos-the muffled shouts of operatives, the hum of enchantments, the crackle of suppression spells-pressed down on him as he navigated the labyrinthine halls of the museum.

"The smoke won't hold much longer, he thought, his sharp gray eyes darting through the shifting haze. The operatives' equipment was already countering his smokescreen, faint glimmers of light and mana-sensing lenses cutting through the obscurity. Their voices grew louder, their movements more precise.

"Hold your breath," Astron had ordered earlier, and now he exhaled slowly, steadying his focus. His eyes flickered faintly with mana as he activated his perception ability. The museum's layered formation shimmered faintly in his vision, revealing the intricate threads of the suppression network.

Ahead, another squad of operatives emerged from the fog, their movements

disciplined and coordinated. Their weapons glinted faintly, suppression runes etched along the blades and arrows, designed to disrupt and incapacitate.

"Block the exit!" one of them barked.

Astron's lips pressed into a thin line. He adjusted Irina's position slightly on his shoulder, her silence a testament to her understanding of the situation. She wasn't resisting; she knew he needed every ounce of focus to get them out alive.

The faint glow of the suppression field's knots pulsed in Astron's vision. His mind calculated quickly.

"If I can break those..."

Astron veered sharply to the left, his figure a blur as he sprinted toward a grand archway leading into another wing of the museum. Behind him, the operatives gave chase, their footsteps a thunderous rhythm against the stone floors. Suppression arrows zipped past, narrowly missing him, their mana-laden shafts embedding into walls and displays with sharp thunks.

He reached into his spatial bracelet, pulling out a dagger, Channeling mana into the blade, he hurled it toward the nearest knot in the formation-a faintly glowing point nestled in the wall near a display case.

BOOM!

The dagger detonated, shattering the knot and sending a shockwave through the network. The oppressive mana in the immediate area flickered briefly, the suppression weakening.

"Three more to go."

But the operatives were relentless. Another squad emerged from an adjacent corridor, cutting off his path. They raised their weapons, and mana flared as they prepared to

fire.

Astron's mind worked rapidly. He skidded to a halt, his sharp eyes scanning the area. To his right, a massive column extended to the ceiling, its base adorned with intricate carvings. Beyond it, the second knot shimmered faintly.

"Hang tight," he muttered under his breath, shifting Irina's weight.

Astron's mind raced as the operatives closed in, their weapons raised and shimmering with lethal intent. His sharp gaze darted to the hall's ceiling, supported by ornately carved pillars. Each structure gleamed faintly in his mana-imbued vision, revealing subtle weak points that he could exploit.

The suppressive weight of the surrounding mana surged as the operatives unleashed a coordinated attack. Bolts of energy, arrows, and enchantments rained down toward him in a torrent, a deadly storm aimed to pin him in place.

Astron gritted his teeth, his muscles coiling with anticipation. "[Shadowborne]." Shadows rippled across his body, coiling like tendrils as his speed surged beyond normal limits. In a blur, he dashed forward, weaving through the barrage with precision. Yet, he could feel Irina's weight affecting his ability to maneuver-he wouldn't be able to keep this up for long.

"This isn't sustainable, he thought grimly. His mind clicked into gear, calculating a new strategy. One that required him to change tactics entirely.

He skidded to a halt behind a shattered display case, placing Irina down gently against its jagged remains. His purple eyes glowed faintly with mana as he turned to her.

"Stay low," he commanded, his voice calm but firm.

Irina blinked, her hazel eyes locking with his. "Astron-"

"Do you trust me?" His voice cut through the chaos, sharp and deliberate.

Irina's hesitation lasted barely a moment. "Yes," she replied, her voice steady despite the madness around them.

From his spatial location, he drew the [Celestalith], its sleek form materializing in his hand with a faint hum of energy. The weapon shimmered as it shifted, its form morphing seamlessly into a bow. The string of the weapon glowed faintly with a pulsing blue energy, emanating a cold, otherworldly light.

Irina's eyes widened as she watched him. This was the first time she had seen this weapon. "What is this?"

She knew it was not the time to ask this, but she did subconsciously.

Astron wasted no time. Drawing back the bowstring, he summoned three arrows simultaneously, each one crackling with concentrated Lunar energy. He aimed with precision, his movements fluid and deliberate despite the chaos around him. "Let's start clearing some space," he muttered under his breath.

TWANG!

The first set of arrows tore through the air, streaking toward three of the towering pillars. Each projectile struck its mark with unerring accuracy, exploding on impact

with a surge of blue light.

**BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!**

The pillars shattered, their fragments raining down in a cascade of debris. The operatives nearest to them stumbled, their formation thrown into disarray as dust and rubble filled the air.

Without pausing, Astron nocked another three arrows, pulling the bowstring taut. His focus never wavered as he targeted the next set of pillars supporting the expansive

ceiling.

**TWANG!**

The second volley flew with devastating speed, each arrow streaking toward its mark. More pillars collapsed under the explosive force, the structure above groaning ominously as the balance of the space shifted.

The operatives hesitated, their once-coordinated movements faltering as the battlefield tilted in Astron's favor. He didn't give them time to recover.

"Keep your head down!" he called to Irina, his voice cutting through the crumbling

chaos.

She obeyed without hesitation, crouching low behind the debris while Astron loosed his final volley. The arrows shot forward, each glowing brighter than the last as he

poured more mana into the attack.

TWANG! TWANG! TWANG!

The last three arrows struck the remaining load-bearing pillars, detonating with immense force. The ceiling above groaned and buckled, chunks of stone and beams collapsing onto the operatives below. Cries of alarm and the clang of falling debris echoed through the space as the team scrambled to avoid being crushed.

The battlefield fell silent for a moment, save for the sound of settling rubble. Astron straightened, the glow of his bow dimming as he turned to Irina. Dust and smoke swirled around them, obscuring the view of the operatives who had been chasing

them.

"That should buy us some time," he said, his tone calm but edged with exhaustion. Irina stood, brushing debris from the armor that she had conjured.

'Flames.'

As the dust began to settle, Irina stood cautiously, brushing debris from her armor. Her flames, usually a roaring source of her power, were suppressed, leaving her feeling unbalanced and vulnerable. But as she clenched her fists, trying to summon

them again, she froze.

'Wait.'

Her hazel eyes flickered with realization, her mind racing. She could feel the familiar weight of suppression smothering her fire mana-but that wasn't all she had. 'What am I even doing? The thought struck her like a bolt of lightning. She wasn't

limited to her flames. Her mana wasn't just fire-it was hers. It was versatile, adaptable, and more than capable of finding another path.

Astron glanced over at her, his sharp purple eyes narrowing slightly. "What is it?" he

asked, his tone calm but alert.

Irina didn't respond immediately. Instead, she closed her eyes, focusing on the flow of energy within her. The suppression fields were intricately designed to target elemental mana, particularly flame-based Awakened. But telekinesis? That was

different.

Her eyes snapped open, a small, triumphant smile curling her lips. "They suppressed my flames," she said, her voice steady. "But they didn't suppress me."

Astron's expression didn't change, though his gaze sharpened. "Go on." Irina extended her hands, her mana flaring-not as fire, but as pure force. Invisible

threads of energy pulsed outward, gripping the scattered debris around her. Shattered stone and steel fragments trembled before rising into the air, suspended in her

telekinetic hold.

"I've been relying on my flames too much," she admitted, her voice laced with determination. "But I'm not just fire. I'm better than that."

With a flick of her wrist, the debris launched forward, slamming into the remnants of the operatives' formation. The precision of her telekinesis was evident-each projectile moved with deliberate, deadly intent, targeting joints and weak points in their armor.

The operatives scrambled to adjust, their once-coordinated movements thrown into

disarray.

Astron watched, his lips twitching faintly as if in approval. "Good," he said, his tone steady. "You are adapting well."

Irina smirked, the challenge igniting something fierce within her. "Oh, I plan to do

more."

She crouched low, her hands sweeping in controlled arcs as she manipulated the battlefield. Shards of glass and steel lifted around her, forming a swirling barrier that moved with her as she advanced. It wasn't just a defense-it was a weapon, striking at

the operatives who dared approach.

"Then now.....Go...."

Irina straightened, her grip tightening on the swirling mass of debris orbiting her like

a barrier. The dust and smoke from their chaotic battle hung thick in the air, the operatives adjusting their approach as they realized she wasn't a passive target anymore. Her hazel eyes gleamed with determination as she turned toward Astron.

"You're holding back because of me," she said, her voice steady despite the chaos around them.

Astron, still poised and ready, glanced at her sharply, his daggers glinting faintly in the

dim light. "I'm making sure you survive," his voice calm yet firm-"not holding back."

Irina smirked faintly. "I'll survive. I'm not helpless, Astron. You said it yourself-I'm adapting." The operatives began advancing again, their movements slower now as they assessed her capabilities. Irina flicked her hand, sending a shard of steel whistling through the air, striking one of the operatives squarely in the shoulder and forcing him back.

Astron remained silent, his sharp gaze locked on her. The hesitation in his stance, however slight, didn't go unnoticed.

She turned to him fully, stepping forward despite the press of enemies. "Do you not

trust me, Astron?"

His expression didn't change, but the faintest flicker of something passed through his purple eyes. "I trust you," he said simply, his voice unwavering.

"Then go," she said, her tone resolute, mirroring his earlier command to her. She

gestured sharply toward the shadows beyond the operatives. "You're faster on your own, and you'll cover more ground. Get to the next suppression knot." Astron's gaze lingered on her for a moment longer, searching for any sign of doubt or

uncertainty. There was none. Irina's stance, her expression, and the fire-not literal, but unmistakable-burning in her eyes all spoke of unwavering resolve. "Fine," he said, at last, his tone low and measured. "But don't overestimate them-or

yourself."

"I won't," she replied, her smirk returning. "But don't you underestimate me either."

Astron gave the faintest shake of his head, his lips twitching into the barest hint of a

smile. Without another word, his figure dissolved into the shadows, his presence vanishing as if he'd never been there.

'Now.....let me show you that I am more than just a flame sorcerer.' She had picked up a thing or two in her spars with Astron as well.

## Chapter 722 164.4 - The Attack

The air thickened with tension as the operatives moved closer, their movements coordinated, weapons gleaming faintly under the suppressed glow of the room. Irina's hazel eyes scanned their formation, her sharp mind already calculating trajectories and counters. With her flames suppressed, she turned to the power she knew she could rely on her [Telekinesis].

She exhaled sharply, focusing her mana. Invisible threads pulsed outward, gripping the shattered debris scattered around her. Broken stone, shards of glass, and fragments of steel trembled before rising into the air, orbiting her like a swarm of deadly satellites.



"This will have to do," she thought grimly.

-Telekinesis

The first wave of attackers surged forward, their weapons raised. A suppression baton crackled as it swung toward her head, but Irina's hand flicked upward. A chunk of steel shot through the air, intercepting the blow with a resonant clang that sent the operative stumbling back.

Another lunged from the side, wielding an enchanted blade designed to pierce defensive barriers. Irina twisted her wrist, sending a slab of stone hurtling toward him. The impact struck his chest, knocking him off his feet and sending him sprawling to the ground.

The operatives hesitated for a split second, recalibrating their approach. Irina didn't wait for them to regroup. With a sharp motion, she launched the debris outward, each piece finding its mark with unnerving precision. One shard struck an attacker's knee, forcing him down, while another slammed into the chest of a second, cracking his

armor.

-Body Enchantment

Even as her telekinesis created a defensive perimeter, Irina knew she couldn't rely on it alone. Her body was her last line of defense, and she wasn't going to be caught unprepared.

Closing her eyes for a brief moment, she reached inward, channeling her mana into her muscles and bones. Her limbs tingled with the familiar sensation of [Enhancement] magic taking hold. Her strength surged, her reflexes sharpened, and her stamina stabilized, even under the oppressive weight of the suppression field. When the next operative came at her, his blade swinging low toward her legs, she didn't dodge. Instead, she stepped forward, her enhanced leg sweeping upward in a brutal kick that connected with his weapon arm. The force of the blow disarmed him instantly, sending his weapon skittering across the floor.

Another operative closed in from behind, aiming for her blind spot. Irina's senses

--

flared, and she pivoted sharply. Her telekinesis caught a shard of glass mid-air, hurling it toward the attacker with deadly speed. The shard struck true, slicing across his shoulder and forcing him to retreat.

The operatives adjusted, coordinating their efforts with practiced movements. Suppression arrows rained down from above, their mana-laden tips glowing faintly. Irina's eyes darted upward, and with a sweeping motion of her hand, she redirected the debris around her to intercept the projectiles. Each arrow shattered on impact, the fragments falling harmlessly to the ground.

But the reprieve was brief. A group of three operatives charged her simultaneously, their enchanted weapons glowing faintly as they aimed to overwhelm her defenses.

Irina crouched low, her body coiling like a spring. Her telekinesis flared to life, lifting a massive slab of stone from the ground. With a sharp motion, she hurled it toward the group. The sheer force of the impact sent two operatives flying, while the third managed to sidestep the projectile.

He lunged at her, his blade aimed for her chest. Irina shifted her stance, her enhanced body moving with speed and precision. She caught his wrist mid-strike, her grip like iron. With a twist of her arm, she disarmed him, the blade clattering to the floor.

"Not today," she muttered, driving her knee into his stomach. The operative crumpled, gasping for air as he fell to the ground.

Despite her efforts, the sheer number of attackers was beginning to weigh on her. Sweat dripped down her temple, her breathing steady but labored. Her enhanced body could only sustain this level of exertion for so long, and the suppression field continued to press heavily on her mana reserves.

But Irina didn't falter. She tightened her focus, the debris around her swirling with renewed intensity. Each movement of her hands sent shards and fragments flying, her telekinesis acting as both sword and shield.

'I just need to hold on,' she thought, her resolve hardening. 'Astron will finish this. I just have to keep standing.'

The next wave of operatives advanced, their confidence shaken but their intent unwavering. Irina raised her hands, her telekinetic grip tightening on every piece of debris within reach.

"Come on, then," she said, her voice steady despite the strain. "Let's see if you can keep up."

The battle raged on, but Irina stood firm, a force of will and raw power refusing to be overwhelmed. This wasn't just survival-it was defiance, and she wasn't going to let them take her down.

As the last of the operatives retreated momentarily, Irina's steady breath echoed in the smoke-filled hall. She tightened her grip on the swirling debris around her, her mind clear and her stance firm. But then, a new presence emerged-a chilling shift in the air that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

Two figures stepped forward from the shadows, their movements deliberate and unhurried. Unlike the other operatives, these two radiated an aura of authority and danger, their confidence palpable.

Irina's sharp hazel eyes assessed them immediately. One of them carried a spear, its sleek, enchanted surface glowing faintly in the dim light. He was tall and lean, his movements precise as he twirled the weapon lazily in his hands. The other wielded a sword, its blade jagged and menacing, designed for more than just killing-it was made to inflict pain. This one was broader, his stance grounded and unshakable, his eyes gleaming with a cruel sense of amusement.

"Well, well," the swordsman said, his voice low and mocking. "Look at her. The Emberheart heiress, fighting so hard. Alone."

The spearman chuckled, his gaze sweeping over Irina with predatory intent. "Do you really think you can hold us off by yourself?" He tilted his head, his smirk widening. "How arrogant. Typical of the Emberhearts."

Irina didn't respond, her expression hardening as she steadied herself. She adjusted her stance slightly, her telekinetic barrier tightening around her.

"Silent now?" the swordsman sneered. "Or maybe... your boyfriend left you to deal with this mess on your own?" His words dripped with mockery. "Don't worry, though. He'll be following your direction soon enough."

Irina's jaw tightened, her grip on the swirling debris faltering for just a second. 'Ignore them, she told herself, forcing her focus back onto the fight. "Their words are just

another weapon!

The spearman took a step forward, his weapon spinning once before pointing directly at her. "Let's see how long she can last."

The spearman lunged first, his weapon moving with speed and precision. Irina redirected a chunk of debris toward him, but he sidestepped it effortlessly, closing the distance between them in an instant. His spear lashed out, the enchanted tip glinting as it sliced toward her.

Irina threw up a telekinetic barrier, catching the strike, but the force sent her skidding back a step. She countered immediately, sending shards of steel toward him, but the swordsman was already moving, his blade flashing as he intercepted the projectiles

mid-air.

"Not bad," the spearman said, his tone mocking. "But not good enough."

Before she could react, he thrust again, his spear grazing her side. Pain lanced through her as blood seeped from the cut, but she grit her teeth, refusing to falter. She lashed out telekinetically, forcing the two back momentarily.

The swordsman chuckled darkly, stepping forward as the spearman circled to her side.

"You're good," he admitted, his voice carrying a twisted sense of approval. "But we

don't need to kill you, do we?"

They weren't trying to end her life-they were trying to incapacitate her. To capture her. That much was evident from the start so she was not surprised at all.

'Hch....'

But well, that was going to be their mistake.

The spearman's enchanted weapon glinted in the dim light as it lunged forward, aimed with surgical precision at Irina's abdomen. Her muscles tensed, her body already bracing for the pain. Blood

already seeped from shallow cuts across her arms and sides, her enhanced body pushed to its limit. But her resolve didn't waver. Just a little longer,' she thought, her hazel eyes fierce despite the exhaustion weighing

on her limbs. I can endure this. I trust him.'

The spear was mere inches away when it stopped.

A pulse of purple energy erupted between her and the spearman, an ethereal barrier

appearing out of nowhere. The energy shimmered, its surface swirling with intricate patterns as it spread across the battlefield. The spearman froze mid-strike, his arm trembling as he tried and failed to push past the invisible force.

"What is this?" he snarled, his voice carrying a note of panic. Irina's eyes widened, her breath catching as she took in the scene. The swordsman, too, found himself unable to move, his blade halted mid-swing. His expression twisted into one of confusion and anger as he struggled against the same force binding his

companion.

"It's him," Irina whispered, her voice laced with a mixture of relief and determination.

'Astron.'

The faint hum of suppression mana, a constant oppressive weight on her senses, began to fade. Irina's eyes flickered toward the edges of the room, and her heart

skipped a beat as she realized what was happening.

The veil suppressing her fire magic was disappearing.

She flexed her fingers instinctively, a flicker of flame sparking to life at her fingertips. The warmth spread quickly, familiar and comforting, as her connection to her core reignited. The suppression

was gone, and her power-her fire-washers again. The spearman's struggle grew more frantic, his voice rising as he barked, "What kind

of trick is this?!"

The swordsman snarled, his tone sharp with frustration. "This isn't over! Do you hear

me, Emberheart?!"

Irina stepped forward, her flames igniting fully now, coiling around her arms like

living serpents. Her gaze was sharp, unyielding as she stared down her immobilized attackers. The pain in her body was still there, but it felt distant now, muted by the

surge of power coursing through her veins. "Heh.....Finally....."

It was her battlefield now.

## Chapter 723 164.5 - The Attack

After leaving Irina, Astron moved like a phantom, his figure weaving through the smoke and shadows of the collapsing museum with practiced ease. The faint pulse of the suppression knots still active glimmered in his mind's eye, their locations etched into his memory. Each second counted-not only to dismantle the remaining two suppressors but to ensure Irina's safety.

He'd seen the spark of telekinetic force in her during their spars, subtle but potent. It was enough to give him confidence that she could hold her own, at least temporarily. Still, the five elite operatives, especially their leader, were no ordinary opponents. Irina wasn't ready to face them alone-not without her fire.

'Keep them off her. Buy her time.'

That is why, he had already formulated a plan.

'Indeed.'

Astron slipped into the shadows, his body dissolving into the inky tendrils of [Shadowborne]. The oppressive weight of the suppression fields no longer hindered his movements as severely; with each knot he broke, his connection to his mana grew stronger.

Ahead, three operatives loomed, their heightened senses scanning for him. One of them, clad in enchanted armor etched with runes, barked an order.

"Spread out! He's using the shadows-don't let him isolate us!"

Astron's mouth faintly, his form reappearing behind one of the operatives. In a single, fluid motion, he drove a dagger into the man's exposed joint, bypassing the enchanted plates of his armor. The operative crumpled with a muffled cry, his weapon clattering uselessly to the ground.

The other two turned, their blades flashing with suppression runes. But before they could react, Astron melted back into the shadows, his presence vanishing as if he'd never been there.

"He's toying with us!" one shouted, his voice tinged with frustration.

The second operative turned, swinging wildly at the sound, but it was futile. Astron reappeared to his left, his dagger slicing cleanly across the man's back. The operative stumbled, and before he could recover, Astron struck again-precise and lethal. The man fell, joining his comrade on the cold stone floor.

The last operative stood frozen, his eyes wide as he scanned the smoke-filled room. Astron emerged behind him, his purple eyes glowing faintly.

"Run," Astron whispered, his voice icy.

The man didn't hesitate, bolting down the corridor. Astron didn't follow; he had no time to waste. Instead, he turned his focus toward the second suppression knot, shimmering faintly through the haze.

\*\*\*\*

Rovan Kael observed the skirmish from a higher vantage point, his sharp eyes narrowing as he tracked Astron's movements.

"He's faster than expected," one of his elites muttered, stepping beside him.

"Taster, yes," Rovan replied, his voice cold and measured. "But not unstoppable. He's playing guerilla, relying on the shadows and his speed. He won't hold out once we force him into open combat."

The elite operative nodded. "Shall we engage directly?"

Rovan's lips curled into a faint smile. "Not yet. Let him break another knot. It'll give us the opening we need."

Astron reached the second knot, its intricate structure embedded in the ceiling of a narrow hallway. He pulled out a dagger, channeling his mana into the blade until it glowed faintly with blue energy. With a sharp throw, the dagger streaked toward the knot.

BOOM!

The explosion rocked the hallway, sending fragments of stone raining down as the suppression field weakened further. Astron felt the pressure ease slightly, his mana flowing more freely.

'One left.'

But as he turned, he felt a sudden shift in the air-an oppressive presence that made his instincts scream.

Rovan Kael stepped into the hallway, flanked by two of his strongest operatives. The man exuded calm authority, his stance loose but calculated. His hand rested lightly on the hilt of a curved blade at his side.

"You've been a nuisance," Rovan said, his tone almost conversational. "But this ends now."



Astron's eyes narrowed, his grip tightening on Celestalith. He didn't reply, his focus locking on the three opponents in front of him. He could feel the weight of their presence-these weren't ordinary hunters. Their movements were deliberate, their coordination precise.

Rovan drew his blade, its edge glowing faintly with suppression runes. "You can't keep running. Let's see how well you fight in the light."

The fight began with blistering speed. Rovan's operatives surged forward, their

weapons flashing with mana as they attacked in tandem. Astron darted into the shadows, reappearing behind one and striking with his dagger.

CLANK!

The man deflected the blow with surprising speed, forcing Astron to retreat.

SLASH!

Rovan advanced, his blade slashing through the air with deadly strength.

One hit and it would be over.

Astron dodged, his movements fluid, but the second operative closed in from the side, their coordination forcing him onto the defensive.

"They're good," Astron thought, his mind working rapidly. "But they're not invincible."

He feinted left, drawing the second operative closer, then twisted sharply, driving his dagger into the man's exposed side. The operative staggered, and Astron vanished into the shadows before Rovan's blade could find him.

"You're persistent," Rovan remarked, his tone calm. "But this isn't a game you can win."

Astron didn't respond, his focus already shifting to the final suppression knot. It glimmered faintly behind Rován and his remaining operative, its intricate structure glowing faintly with mana.

'If I take that out, Irina will have full access to her flames.'

He surged forward, his body a blur as he launched himself past Rován. The leader's

blade flashed, narrowly missing Astron as he darted toward the knot. He drew Celestalith mid-motion, shifting it into its bow form.

TWANG!

Three arrows streaked through the air, each glowing with concentrated Lunar

energy.

"DON'T LET HIM!"

But with his purpose evident, things wouldn't be that easy.

The moment his intent became clear, the operatives reacted swiftly, their coordination flawless. Seven additional fighters emerged from the smoke, positioning themselves strategically to block his path. From behind them, Rován and his two elites tightened their formation, the air around them pulsing with contained mana.

"Don't let him near the knot!" one of the operatives shouted, their voices sharp and

resolute.

Arrows, mana-infused projectiles, and bolts of elemental energy streaked through the air toward him in a relentless barrage. Astron's sharp eyes flickered, tracking the

trajectories with precision.

SWOOSH!

He darted to the left, narrowly avoiding a crackling lightning bolt. Another projectile whistled past him as he twisted his body mid-air, his movements fluid and precise. Yet, despite his agility, the operatives weren't firing blindly. Their attacks were calculated, creating a web of suppression to limit his options.

'Not bad for a squad like this,' Astron thought, his mind racing. He could feel the battlefield narrowing around him, the open fire serving not just to strike him but to cut off his avenues of approach.

Astron's lips pressed into a thin line. In a swift motion, he gripped Celestalith, its ethereal glow pulsing faintly in his hand. With a thought, the weapon shifted, morphing into its martial arts form—a sleek, elongated staff adorned with faint,

swirling shadows.

The air around him darkened, tendrils of shadow coiling and rising like living entities.

He activated his newly acquired defensive skills.

"[Shadow Embrace]."

The shadows surrounding him surged, enveloping his body in a protective barrier. The

black tendrils shimmered faintly, creating a dense, shifting shield that absorbed the incoming projectiles. Bolts of energy and arrows struck the barrier, dissipating harmlessly against the swirling darkness.

The mana cost was steep; he felt it draining from his reserves like a steady tide. But Astron pressed forward, his focus unyielding.

'No time to conserve mana. The knot has to go.'

One of the elite operatives surged forward, his enchanted blade aimed directly at

Astron's chest. The man's stance was solid, his aura exuding deadly intent. Astron didn't slow. His shadow-cloaked form became a blur as he closed the gap. Just before the operative's blade could strike, Astron shifted into [Cyclone Stance], his

movements seamless and fluid.

WHOOSH!

He twisted, his staff spinning with immense force, creating a small vortex of shadow

and wind. The operative's blade missed by inches as Astron sidestepped and countered with a precise palm strike infused with mana. The force of the blow sent the man hurtling backward, his weapon clattering to the ground.

SWOOSH!

Before the next operative could close the

Astron bent his knees and leaped

skyward, the shadows propelling him higher. Below, another elite swung his sword in

a wide arc, but Astron's aerial maneuver carried him clear of the attack. Mid-air, he extended his hand, activating [Grapple]. A thread of mana shot out.

J

latching onto the wall near the knot. With a sharp tug, he pulled himself forward, his body flying over the heads of the remaining operatives.

As he soared through the air, Astron extended his free hand, recalling the daggers he

had thrown earlier. They responded instantly, ripping free from their embedded positions and streaking toward him. The operatives closest to the daggers instinctively ducked, momentarily thrown off balance.

With a deft motion, Astron caught the daggers mid-air, his grip firm and practiced.

Using the momentum of his leap, he hurled them again, this time directly at Rován and his remaining elite.

The daggers streaked toward Rován with immense speed, forcing the leader to halt his advance.

CLANK!

"Tsk."

Rován's blade flashed as he deflected one dagger with a sharp, practiced motion. The second and third daggers struck the ground before him, exploding in bursts of concussive force.

BOOM!

The shockwave rippled through the area, sending dust and debris flying. Rován raised an arm to shield his face, his sharp gaze fixed on Astron even as the explosion momentarily disrupted his momentum.

Landing lightly on the wall near the suppression knot, Astron didn't waste a second.

He drew Celestalith again, shifting it back into bow form. His purple eyes gleamed as

he nocked a single arrow, channeling an immense surge of Lunar energy into the projectile.

TWANG!

The arrow streaked forward, striking the knot dead center.

BOOM!

The suppression knot exploded, the intricate formation shattering into a cascade of blue light. The oppressive weight of the mana suppression lifted entirely, and Astron felt a surge of relief as his full strength returned.

'Hmm...'

But that was not enough.

Something.

'Wait.'

From the corner of his eyes, Astron saw that Irina was in danger.

Umbralith.

Hence he changed the [Celestalith] in the last second.

And activated the skill, stopping the others from advancing. Though by this point, his mana reserves were really about to go down.

But he knew things would be fine by now. I've done my part. Your turn, Irina.'

## Chapter 724 164.6 The Attack

The instant her flames roared to life, Irina could feel the shift in the air. The oppressive suppression field that had weighed her down was gone, replaced by the crackling energy of her awakened fire. The flames coiled around her arms like serpents ready to strike, their heat rolling off her in waves. She flexed her fingers, embers dancing between them, her hazel eyes locked on the two immobilized attackers.

Their fear was evident now-the subtle tremble in the spearman's hands, the tightness in the swordsman's jaw as he struggled against the binding force. It sent a thrill through her, a vindication of the anger simmering within her chest.

"They thought they could take me,' she thought, her lips curling into a smirk. Threaten me, mock me, and expect to get away with it.'

The purple energy holding the assailants dissipated without warning, leaving them free to move. The spearman staggered slightly before regaining his balance, his weapon raised defensively. The swordsman glanced at him briefly, their confidence clearly shaken but not entirely broken.

Irina tilted her head, her smirk widening. "What's the matter?" she taunted, her voice low and laced with mockery. "You looked so confident before."

The spearman snarled, trying to mask his unease with bravado. "You're just one girl- don't think you can-"

He didn't get to finish. With a flick of her wrist, Irina sent a wave of flames surging toward him. The fire roared to life, consuming the air between them in an instant. The spearman barely managed to leap aside, the edges of his cloak igniting as he rolled to extinguish the flames.

The swordsman lunged toward her, his jagged blade gleaming. Irina met his charge head-on, her telekinesis flaring. Shards of debris lifted around her, propelled by invisible force. The first shard struck his arm, deflecting his blade; the second slammed into his knee, forcing him to falter.

"You think you can capture me?" she hissed, her flames intensifying. "You think you can mock me and walk away?"

The swordsman growled, trying to push forward, but Irina wasn't finished. She raised her hand, flames swirling above her palm before she hurled them forward. The fire lashed out like a whip, striking his chest and sending him sprawling backward.

The spearman tried to counter, his weapon spinning toward her in a precise arc. Irina's flames flared brighter, intercepting the strike. The spear's enchantment struggled against the fire, but her telekinesis slammed into his side, throwing him off balance.

Irina stepped forward, her flames spreading like a living entity, consuming the room around her. The shattered debris she had been using moments ago ignited, turning into blazing projectiles. With each flick of her wrist, the fire danced to her will, a symphony of destruction that left no corner untouched.

The spearman scrambled to his feet, his movements desperate now as he tried to avoid the inferno. Irina's flames surged toward him, forcing him into a corner. He swung his spear wildly, but she deflected each strike with precise telekinetic force.

The swordsman wasn't faring any better. His movements were slower now, his armor scorched and his blade struggling to find its mark. Irina's fire seemed to anticipate his every move, cutting him off before he could get close.

"You're not getting out of here," she said coldly, her voice steady and commanding. "Neither of your team."

The spearman lunged again, this time with a desperate roar, but Irina was ready. She raised both hands, her flames coiling around him like a serpent. With a sharp motion, she tightened the fiery grip, the heat forcing him to drop his weapon as he screamed in pain.

The swordsman tried to retreat, his confidence crumbling, but Irina's telekinesis locked onto him. A jagged piece of blazing steel shot forward, striking his leg and pinning him in place. He snarled in pain, his blade falling from his hand.

The moment she felt the flicker of movement from her peripheral vision, Irina's instincts flared. More figures emerged from the smoke, rushing toward her from every angle, their weapons raised and glinting ominously in the fiery light of her magic.



But Irina didn't flinch. Her hazel eyes burned with defiance as she stood tall, her flames coiling and pulsing in anticipation. Without lifting her arms, she summoned a spell that surged with her signature power.

[School of Emberheart: Infernal Dominion]

The room erupted in fire as waves of flame spiraled outward from her body, coiling like fiery tendrils and lashing out in every direction. The four approaching attackers were caught in an instant, their screams silenced as the flames engulfed them, burning through armor and flesh alike.

The heat was scaring, the intensity almost blinding, but Irina stood unaffected at the center of the inferno, her eyes scanning for the next threat. She had no time to rest.

Just as she prepared to cast again, her senses screamed a warning. Another figure lunged toward her from behind, their blade aimed for her exposed side. Irina turned sharply, but before she could react, a blur of motion intercepted the attack.

CLANG!

The sound of steel meeting steel rang through the air as Astron deflected the blow with a precise, fluid strike. His dagger gleamed faintly, his movements sharp despite

the exhaustion written on his face. He drove the attacker back with a swift counter, his purple eyes narrowing as he turned toward Irina.

"You did well," she said, her tone even but laced with relief. Her flames flickered as she allowed herself a brief moment to assess him. "Are you okay?"

Astron gave a faint nod, his breathing steady but strained. "My mana is on the verge of depletion," he admitted, his voice calm despite the chaos around them. "But aside from that. I'm fine."

Irina's lips curled into a smirk, her confidence returning. "Good. Cover me, then."

"I will," he replied without hesitation, his stance steady as he turned to face the next wave of attackers.

The remaining operatives hesitated, their movements faltering as they realized the tide of the battle had turned. Between Irina's unrelenting flames and Astron's shadow-like precision, their advantage was gone. It was no longer a coordinated assault-it was a desperate attempt to salvage what they could.

The spearman and swordsman exchanged a quick glance, their earlier bravado replaced with grim determination. One of them barked an order, their voice sharp and urgent. "Pull back! Take her down if you can, but retreat!"

The operatives moved quickly, their focus shifting to escape. But Irina and Astron weren't about to let them go.

"They're running," Astron said, his purple eyes narrowing as he took in the chaotic

retreat.

Irina's flames surged around her as she took a step forward, her voice carrying over the din of the battle. "Not so fast."

The two moved in tandem, their actions coordinated without the need for words. Astron darted ahead, his movements fluid as he targeted the retreating operatives, his daggers striking with lethal precision. He cut down two as they tried to regroup, their bodies crumpling before they could reach the exit.

Meanwhile, Irina raised her arms, her flames swirling into a massive vortex that engulfed the center of the room. School of Emberheart: Pyric Tempest] Her magic surged outward, blocking the escape routes with walls of fire that forced the remaining operatives to scatter.

The spearman turned, his weapon spinning defensively as he tried to fend off the relentless assault. Irina's flames lashed toward him, and though he managed to deflect the first strike, the second wrapped around his arm, searing through flesh and forcing

him to drop his weapon.

The swordsman snarled, his jagged blade slashing at Astron in a desperate attempt to cover their retreat. But Astron moved faster, his dagger slicing cleanly through the man's guard. The swordsman stumbled back, blood dripping from a deep cut across

his side.

The battlefield crackled with tension as Irina's flames surged around her, their golden-red glow casting flickering shadows on the walls. The operatives were retreating, but their strategy shifted as they used the scattering civilians for cover. Irina's hazel eyes burned with frustration as she clenched her fists, her magic pulsating in the air around her.

"Cowards," she muttered under her breath, her flames dimming slightly as she hesitated. She couldn't risk hurting innocent bystanders.

The spearman had fallen back, clutching his charred arm, while the swordsman staggered, bleeding heavily but still on his feet. The other operatives moved in erratic patterns, slipping behind frightened civilians who huddled against the walls, their cries of panic filling the room.

Irina's lips curled in frustration. "They're using the civilians," she growled, her flames flickering with restrained intensity. "I can't... I can't unleash anything strong enough to end this without risking them."

Before she could make her next move, Astron raised a hand, his calm gesture stopping

her in her tracks.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice sharp but laced with confusion.

"Stop," Astron said, his tone steady and composed. His sharp purple eyes scanned the

room, taking in every detail-the operatives' movements, the civilians' positions, the exhaustion etched into Irina's face.

"Why?" Irina demanded, her flames swirling faintly around her fists, reluctant to fade entirely. "We can finish this!"

Astron's gaze turned to her, his expression unyielding. "You're injured," he said bluntly. "And we're not in a good condition for a chase. If we push too hard, we risk making

things worse."

Irina opened her mouth to argue, but his words struck a chord of reason. He wasn't

wrong her shoulder ached from an earlier strike, and her mana reserves were far

from full.

"And," Astron continued, his tone lower but still firm, "there are civilians here. We've already drawn too much attention, and now that your identity is exposed, you need to be careful about your public image"

Irina's eyes narrowed, her frustration mingling with curiosity as she studied his calm expression. He wasn't just thinking about their immediate situation-there was something deeper in his reasoning, a plan forming behind those sharp eyes.

"You're planning something," she said, her tone quieter but filled with certainty. Astron didn't deny it. Instead, he glanced at the remaining operatives, who had managed to regroup near the edge of the room, still using civilians as their shields. "We've done enough for now," he said. "Let them run. They'll reveal more about themselves later. Right now, we secure the civilians and leave this place intact." Irina hesitated, her flames dimming further as she processed his words. She hated the

idea of letting them go, hated the thought of unfinished business. But Astron's logic

was undeniable.

"Fine," she said at last, her flames fading completely as she stepped back. "But you better have a plan for when we catch them again."

Astron gave a faint nod, his focus shifting to the civilians. "Let's make sure they're safe first."

The remaining operatives, sensing their reprieve, began retreating in earnest. Irina watched them go with a simmering frustration, her hands tightening into fists at her sides. But as she glanced at Astron again, his calm demeanor steadied her resolve. He's right, she thought begrudgingly. There's no point in reckless action now. Not when there's a bigger picture to consider.

#### Chapter 725 165.1 - Fine

The aftermath of the battle settled into an uneasy silence, broken only by the murmurs of frightened civilians and the distant wail of approaching sirens. Irina stood beside Astron, her arms crossed tightly as she surveyed the scene with a mix of frustration and resignation. The operatives had escaped, leaving behind only the chaos and destruction they'd wrought within the museum.

A few minutes later, the heavy sound of boots and wheels reached their cars. A group of Hunters from the City Government and members of the local security team poured into the museum, their weapons drawn and their expressions tense. It was clear from the way they moved—hurried yet slightly disorganized—that they hadn't been prepared for what had transpired.

Irina's amber eyes narrowed as she turned to Astron. "Took them long enough," she muttered, her tone laced with irritation.

Astron, ever calm, simply nodded. "It's not surprising. The assailants were thorough in their preparations. This wasn't a random attack."

As the Hunters fanned out, one of them, a middle-aged man wearing the standard black-and-red armor of the City Bureau, approached Irina and Astron. His expression was grim, his brow furrowed as he took in the damage and the frightened civilians still huddled near the walls.

"I'm Captain Orwin," the man said, his voice steady despite the tension in his eyes. "We got the emergency alert, but..." He trailed off, glancing around the room. "It seems we arrived too late."

Irina crossed her arms tighter, her flames sparking faintly at her fingertips as her frustration boiled over. "You think?" she snapped, earning a sharp glance from Astron. She sighed, reigning in her temper as she continued, "What happened? Why did it take so long for anyone to show up?"

Orwin's jaw tightened, his shoulders sagging slightly as he responded. "The assailants sabotaged us. They disabled the museum's security team before the attack started. We didn't even get a distress call until it was too late. And when we tried to mobilize, we found several of our vehicles sabotaged. Our response was delayed while we secured alternate transport."

Irina's eyes widened slightly, her irritation giving way to reluctant understanding. "They sabotaged your vehicles too?"

The captain nodded grimly. "This city's not that big, and our resources are limited. We weren't prepared for something this coordinated. The operatives knew exactly what they were doing"

Astron's sharp purple eyes flicked toward the captain, his expression unreadable.

"Were there casualties among your team?"

Orwin hesitated before nodding. "Several members of the museum's security staff were incapacitated, but they'll recover. As for our Hunters... we had a few injuries, but no fatalities, thankfully."

Irina frowned, her amber eyes scanning the faces of the arriving Hunters and security personnel. The weight of the situation settled heavily on her shoulders. The attack hadn't just been a random act of chaos-it had been meticulously planned, a deliberate strike against the city's limited defenses.

"They knew exactly how to exploit your weaknesses."

Captain Orwin's voice dropped, heavy with unease. "There's more," he said, glancing warily around the wreckage. "Some of our members are missing. We suspect they were working with the assailants."

Irina's flames flickered faintly at her fingertips again, her frustration rekindled. "So, you're saying this was an inside job? They knew exactly what they were doing because someone from your side helped them."

Orwin gave a grim nod. "It seems likely. Their coordination, the sabotage... none of this would have been possible without inside information. And considering how targeted this attack was-"

"They were after me," Irina cut in, her tone sharp.

Astron, standing silently beside her, turned his sharp purple gaze toward the captain. "She's right. Their tactics were too specific. The fire-magic suppression formation they used-it wasn't random. It was designed to counter Irina."

Irina clenched her fists, her frustration mingling with a faint sense of unease. "If they knew I'd be here, then this wasn't just an attack on the museum. It was a trap." Captain Orwin's jaw tightened. "A trap that failed, thanks to both of you." He gestured to the wreckage, his voice softer but no less serious. "But now that your identities are exposed, you'll need to cooperate with the investigation. The city will want answers, and we'll need all the information you can give us."

Irina exchanged a glance with Astron. His expression remained calm, but she could sense the weight of the situation settling on his shoulders. "Fine," she said, her tone firm. "We'll cooperate. But if this was a trap, we need to find out who set it and why" Astron nodded slightly, his gaze scanning the room as if already piecing together the

answers.

The museum was in shambles. The central section, once adorned with intricate carvings and artifacts, was now a gaping void where a pillar had collapsed. Rubble and debris littered the floor, and the air still carried the faint tang of scorched mana. Despite the destruction, the outcome was unexpectedly fortunate. Several civilians who had been caught near the falling debris spoke up during the investigation. "I thought I was done for," one man said, his voice trembling. "But then... it was like something shielded us. The debris-it never hit us. It just stopped."

"Stopped?" Orwin repeated, his brow furrowing.

Another woman nodded, clutching her young daughter tightly. "Yes, it was like a barrier or... or some kind of force protected us. None of us were hurt, not seriously anyway. It was... miraculous."

Irina's sharp gaze flicked to Astron for a moment, but neither of them said a word. The investigators continued their work, documenting the damage and collecting accounts from the survivors. While some civilians had sustained minor injuries-cuts and bruises from flying debris or the volatile mana resonances of the battle-there were no major casualties.

As the investigation continued, Captain Orwin moved aside to converse with a group of his team. Their hushed voices carried faintly over the wreckage, though the words were difficult to make out.

The captain's expression shifted from grim focus to something closer to shock, then alarm. Finally, with a visible effort, he composed himself and turned back toward Irina and Astron.

He approached them quickly, clearing his throat awkwardly as he stopped a few paces away. "Cough... I apologize for the interruption," he began, his voice careful but tinged with hesitation. "But... by any chance, are you Irina Emberheart?"

Irina's amber eyes narrowed slightly, her lips curving into a smirk. "Took you long enough to figure that out," she said, her tone sharp with amusement.

Orwin's face reddened slightly, though he quickly masked it with a cough. "I-I see. That certainly explains their strategy... and why this attack was so meticulously

planned."

Astron's sharp purple eyes flicked to the captain, his expression unreadable. "You've identified her, but that doesn't answer the real question. Who leaked her presence here to the assailants?"

Orwin's face tightened, and he shifted uncomfortably. "We're still working to

determine that. But if they knew enough to plan this level of countermeasure, it's likely their informant had direct access to sensitive information. That narrows down the

possibilities."

Irina crossed her arms, her smirk fading into a more serious expression. "Well, Captain, I suggest you figure it out quickly. If someone's selling information about me, they'll do it again. And next time, they might not stop at sabotaging a city's defenses." Orwin nodded sharply. "Understood. We'll prioritize identifying the mole. In the meantime..." He hesitated again, his gaze shifting between Irina and Astron. "Given your identities and the nature of this attack, I'll need to report this to the Bureau's

central office. They may send reinforcements or additional investigators." Irina rolled her eyes, though her tone remained composed. "Do what you have to, Captain. Just don't expect us to sit around and wait for answers to fall into our laps." Irina exhaled sharply, her frustration simmering beneath a carefully controlled expression. She had been through situations like this enough times to know how it would unfold. The investigation would drag on, the assailants would remain several



steps ahead, and nothing truly substantial would come from it—not quickly, at least. Crossing her arms, she leveled a piercing gaze at Captain Orwin. "We're done here," she said curtly. "We've given you enough to work with. My partner and I need rest, and frankly, I'm not in the mood to cooperate with a drawn-out investigation that won't yield results anytime soon."

Orwin blinked, momentarily caught off guard by her directness. He glanced at Astron, whose calm, unreadable expression did nothing to offer any reprieve. "Miss Emberheart, he began hesitantly, "I assure you, we're doing everything in our power

—"

"And I'm sure you are," Irina cut him off, her tone firm. "But let's not pretend this isn't going to take weeks of chasing leads that might not even exist. The fact that they escaped this easily tells me they've prepared for every contingency, including this

one."

Orwin's jaw tightened, but he nodded reluctantly, clearly aware of the truth in her words. "Very well," he said, his tone formal. "You're free to go. However, given the nature of this attack, we'd be willing to provide a security detail to ensure your safety

while you're in the city.

Irina shook her head, already turning away. "Don't bother. Your resources are limited, and you need them here. Astron and I can handle ourselves."

Astron offered a small nod of agreement, his sharp purple eyes briefly meeting

Orwin's before shifting toward the exit.

"Understood," Orwin said, his voice resigned. "But please, if you need assistance, don't

hesitate to contact us."

Irina didn't respond, already striding toward the exit with Astron following silently at

her side. The chaos of the museum faded behind them, replaced by the muted hum of the city streets as they stepped outside.

But before they could make it far, a sudden commotion erupted ahead of them. Irina's eyes narrowed as a crowd surged into view-reporters, their cameras flashing and microphones thrust forward as they clamored for attention.

"Miss Emberheart! Is it true you were the target of the attack?"

"Who were the assailants? Do you know why they were after you?" "Was anyone seriously injured in the museum? Are you planning to retaliate?"

The barrage of questions was relentless, the reporters pushing closer with every step. Irina halted, her expression darkening as she realized there would be no easy way past them.

Astron's sharp gaze swept over the crowd, his posture steady but subtly shifting as if preparing for anything. "This is going to be inconvenient," he murmured quietly. Irina rolled her eyes, her frustration simmering beneath the surface. "No kidding." One reporter pushed forward, their voice rising above the others. "Miss Emberheart,

do you believe this attack is connected to your family's prominence in the Federation?

Were these political enemies?"

Irina's ember eyes glinted dangerously, but she managed to keep her tone calm. "No comment," she said firmly, her voice cutting through the clamor.

Chapter 726 165.2 - Fine

The questions from the reporters grew more insistent, their voices rising into a cacophony that grated on Irina's already thin patience.

"Miss Emberheart, is it true your presence here endangered civilians?"

"Are the Emberheart family's rivals responsible for this?"

"What does this say about your ability to protect those around you?"

Irina's flames flickered faintly at her fingertips, her hazel eyes blazing with barely restrained anger. She took a step forward, her frustration threatening to boil over as the barrage of accusations and insinuations refused to relent.

"Enough," she snapped, her voice sharp and commanding, but the reporters only surged closer, sensing an opportunity.

Before she could unleash her temper further, Astron moved smoothly in front of her, his steps deliberate and his presence unmistakable. His tall frame and calm, steady demeanor were enough to make the reporters hesitate for a fraction of a second-but it was his face that truly froze them in their tracks.

Gone was the unremarkable, forgettable visage of his disguise. His true face, with its sharp jawline, piercing purple eyes, and an almost ethereal quality, was now fully visible. The crowd seemed to collectively draw a breath, stunned into brief silence. One of the reporters, a younger woman, visibly blushed, her microphone trembling slightly in her hand. "Ah..." she stammered, her previously aggressive tone faltering. "W-who...?"

Astron's calm, unwavering gaze swept over the crowd, his sharp eyes cutting through their shock like a blade. When he spoke, his voice was low but carried an undeniable weight, silencing any murmurs that had begun to creep back into the crowd.

"Enough," he repeated, his tone firm yet controlled. "This is not the time for baseless speculation or harassment."

The reporters blinked, startled by the quiet authority in his voice.

"There are civilians recovering from a traumatic event

"There are civilians recovering from a traumatic event," Astron continued, his voice steady but carrying a quiet intensity that cut through the stunned silence. His sharp purple eyes swept over the reporters, each gaze held captive by his unwavering presence.

"The assailants who orchestrated this attack were vile," he said, his tone low but carrying an edge of restrained anger. "They had no regard for the innocent lives inside that museum. They sabotaged the security, targeted civilians, and created a situation that muscum. They savolagen une security, tai geitu civilians, diu citattu a situation where their escape mattered more than the lives they put at risk."

The reporters shifted uneasily, some lowering their microphones slightly as Astron's words struck a chord.

He took a deliberate step forward, his calm demeanor unshaken as he continued. "Whatever their motives may have been, it's crucial to distinguish the evil ones from the victims. The civilians inside weren't targets-they were collateral to the assailants, disposable in their eyes. Yet you're here, questioning the people who stood between them and death?"

Astron's gaze moved to the younger reporter, who flinched under the weight of his stare. "This isn't about politics or rivalries. This is about lives-people who were terrified, injured, and could have died. Miss Emberheart and I risked our lives to protect them. If you're so eager for answers, maybe you should ask the people we shielded from falling debris and unchecked magic why they're alive right now."

He paused, his sharp eyes narrowing slightly as he pulled back his sleeve, revealing bruises along his arm. "Do you see this? These are from the fight. Both of us stood on the front lines against an enemy who came prepared to counter us. We didn't do this for fame or recognition. We did it because it was the right thing to do, because that's our job as Hunters-to protect."

The reporters murmured among themselves, their earlier fervor tempered by guilt and uncertainty.

Astron's voice softened, though the intensity in his gaze didn't waver. "So before you aim your questions at us, remember who the real enemies are. Direct your energy toward finding answers that matter-who orchestrated this, why they attacked, and how they can be stopped. That's your responsibility, not trying to vilify the people who stood in their way."

Irina watched Astron with a mixture of admiration and faint irritation as his calm, commanding voice rolled over the crowd of reporters. His sharp purple eyes carried a weight that seemed to silence even the most insistent questions, and the confidence in his tone left no room for doubt or speculation.

"This guy... He really is good at speaking to a camera,' she thought, her gaze lingering on his composed expression. She crossed her arms, feeling the faint ache in her shoulders and the

persistent sting of her own exhaustion. The sparks of irritation she'd felt earlier ebbed as her thoughts turned inward.

I've seen this before. Back when he was working with that other guild."The memory came unbidden-a clip from an interview Astron had done just two weeks ago. Back then, he'd spoken with the same clarity, weaving his words in a way that left no cracks for critics to exploit. 'He was good then too-calm, precise. Like he already knew what they'd ask and how to answer.'

Her eyes narrowed slightly as she considered the similarities. 'And now he's doing the

same thing. Handling this mess like it's just another job, not even letting them get close enough to needle him. A flicker of admiration passed through her chest, quickly followed by a pang of irritation at herself for feeling it. I could do that too. But not now. Not when my body feels like it's been through a grinder.'

She shifted her weight, trying to ease the tension in her legs as the reporters fell quieter, their earlier fervor replaced by a hesitant, almost guilty silence. Astron's words had landed hard, cutting through the chaos with that maddening calm of his. Irina sighed inwardly, her gaze dropping briefly to her own hands. The faint flickers of flames at her fingertips had dimmed, a sign of how drained she truly felt. I'm not in the mood for this. My head's pounding, my body's screaming at me to rest, and here he is, standing tall like none of it even touched him.'

Her eyes flicked back to him, taking in the way the light caught on his features, accentuating the faint bruises on his arms and the sheen of sweat along his jawline. For some inexplicable reason, he seemed almost shiny, as if the chaos around them had only highlighted his presence instead of dulling it.

'He really is something,' she thought begrudgingly, though the corner of her lips twitched as if wanting to smile. Always calm, always steady. It's annoying sometimes, but in moments like this... it's reassuring.'

As Astron finished speaking, the reporters murmured among themselves, their microphones slowly lowering as guilt and hesitation tempered their aggressive questions. Irina let out a slow breath, her frustration giving way to a tired sense of

relief.

Astron turned slightly, his gaze meeting hers briefly. His expression was as unreadable as ever, but there was a faint flicker of something in his eyes-perhaps a silent check to see how she was holding up. Irina straightened instinctively, masking her fatigue with a sharp glare.

"I guess that's one way to shut them up," she muttered, her tone edged with mock

exasperation.

"It worked, didn't it?" he replied evenly.

Irina rolled her eyes, but her irritation lacked its usual bite. 'Of course it worked. It always works when he does it.' She crossed her arms again, her fingers brushing against the faint bruises along her side. Fine, let him handle this. I'm too tired to care

right now.'

As the reporters began to disperse, their questions quieter and less intrusive, Irina couldn't help but glance at Astron one last time. 'Shiny and annoying as ever,' she thought, a flicker of amusement softening her tired gaze. 'But I guess I'll let him have

this one.'

Irina pushed open the doors of the Stellar Vine Inn, the most renowned 5-leaf hotel in the city, its lobby a gleaming expanse of polished stone, soft golden light, and tasteful

floral arrangements. The faint scent of lavender lingered in the air, and the quiet murmur of conversation from well-dressed guests created a soothing background hum. She exhaled, feeling the tension in her shoulders ease slightly as they stepped

inside.

Astron followed silently, his sharp gaze sweeping over the opulent surroundings. His calm demeanor betrayed no particular reaction, but Irina couldn't help but glance at him, curious if he'd make some snarky comment. He didn't, his focus remaining on the wide marble staircase ahead.

The concierge, a young man with immaculate posture and a polished smile, greeted them warmly. "Welcome back, Miss Emberheart. Your suite has been prepared as requested. Shall I send up refreshments?"

Irina shook her head, her voice firm but polite. "Not now. Just ensure we're not disturbed unless it's absolutely necessary."

The concierge inclined his head. "Of course. If you need anything, don't hesitate to

call." They made their way toward the private lift that led directly to the upper suites. As the doors slid shut, enclosing them in the quiet, polished space, Irina leaned against the wall, letting out a soft sigh. Her amber eyes flicked to Astron, who stood with his usual

composed expression.

"This wasn't exactly how I imagined the day going," she muttered, crossing her arms

as the lift began its smooth ascent.

Astron tilted his head slightly, his sharp purple eyes meeting hers briefly. "The

museum tour and a good restaurant, right?"

Irina snorted softly, her lips curving into a faint smile. "Yeah, well, we got the museum

part. Just not quite how I planned it." She glanced at him again, her voice softening.

"And now I'm starving and exhausted. Typical, huh?"

The lift chimed softly as it reached their floor. They stepped out into a hallway lined with elegant gold-and-cream wallpaper and plush carpeting that muffled their footsteps. Irina led the way to their suite, a double-door entry adorned with intricate carvings of vines and flowers. She pushed the doors open, revealing the spacious

interior.

The suite was luxurious but not ostentatious, designed with a refined elegance. Soft lighting illuminated the cream and gold tones of the walls, and the large windows offered a stunning view of the city skyline. A plush seating area with deep armchairs

and a velvet sofa sat near a polished wooden table set with a bowl of fresh fruit. To one side, a door led to a bedroom with a massive, inviting bed draped in crisp, white linens. A faintly glowing mana crystal set in a gilded frame cast a soft, warm light over the entire space.

Irina let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, walking over to the

seating area and dropping onto the sofa. She leaned her head back, closing her eyes for a moment. Finally... something decent after this chaotic day.' Astron remained by the door, his gaze sweeping the room briefly before he set down

his bag. "You went all out," he remarked, his tone calm but not without a trace of

curiosity.

Irina opened one eye to look at him, her lips quirking into a faint smirk. "You expected less? Come on, Astron. You know me better than that."

He gave a slight nod, stepping farther into the room and sitting in one of the armchairs. "It's impressive," he admitted. "For a five-leaf."

Irina huffed softly. "Five-leaf is the best this city has, so don't look down on it too much." She straightened slightly, gesturing to the seating area. "And before you ask, no, I didn't pick this place just to show off. I wanted somewhere decent to rest after all

the walking I thought we'd be doing."

Her smirk faded as her exhaustion caught up to her, and she leaned back again,



closing her eyes. "Didn't think I'd need it because I'd be sore from fighting off operatives in a collapsing museum."

"At least it's over for now."

"For now..." She repeated and then turned her head. "Do you have something in mind?"

It was a question she asked, as she knew that Astron wouldn't let them go just like

that.

"Indeed."

Chapter 727 165.3 - Fine

Astron's calm gaze met Irina's as he leaned slightly forward, resting his forearms on his knees. "Indeed," he said evenly, his tone carrying that quiet weight that always made her listen. "The assailants were clear in their objective-they were after you. But this wasn't just about you personally. They were the first link in a much larger chain." Irina's amber eyes narrowed slightly as she straightened in her seat. The exhaustion still tugged at her, but her curiosity and determination quickly overshadowed it. "You mean the ones who hired them."

Astron nodded. "Exactly. Operatives like these are pawns-useful, but expendable. They were given just enough information to complete their task, but most of them wouldn't know who's pulling the strings."

Irina leaned back again, crossing her arms as her mind began working through the implications. "But their leader... the one giving the orders. He'd know. Or at least have a better idea."

"That's what we need," Astron said, his sharp purple eyes glinting faintly in the soft mana light of the suite. "If we don't move quickly, they'll clean up loose ends. The leader, whoever they are, will likely be eliminated once they've served their purpose!"

Irina frowned, as she also knew that.

"So....Do you know where they are?"

Therefore she decided to go directly into the topic. She has some suspicions about the one behind this attack, but she still needs to make sure.

Astron's sharp purple eyes held Irina's gaze for a moment before he leaned back in the chair. "I do," he said simply, his tone even, betraying nothing more than quiet confidence.

Irina's amber eyes narrowed further as she straightened in her seat. "You know who they are?" she pressed, her voice sharpening with curiosity and a hint of disbelief. "I didn't say that."

Astron stated, his expression calm but unreadable.

Still, it was really surprising that he knew where they were.

"How?" she asked, leaning forward slightly, her brows furrowed. "How do you know?" "Secret," he replied smoothly, his voice steady, offering no elaboration.

Irina's mouth opened, her words catching in her throat as irritation flared in her chest. She puffed her cheeks slightly in frustration before letting out a soft huff and leaning back in her seat. "Fine, keep your secrets," she muttered, crossing her arms as she glanced away.

Astron stood, his movements unhurried as he walked toward the floor-to-ceiling window that dominated one wall of the suite. The glass offered a breathtaking view of the city, its lights glittering like a sea of stars against the deepening night. Irina had made sure to book the most expensive room, one that offered a perfect vantage point from one of the highest floors.

He stopped just in front of the window, his sharp eyes scanning the cityscape below. The faint glow of mana-powered streetlights illuminated the streets, and the distant hum of the city drifted through the silence.

Irina's gaze followed him, her irritation simmering beneath the surface as she watched him stand there, as calm and composed as ever. "This guy," she thought bitterly, "he doesn't even care how I feel. It's always about the mission, the objective, the next step. Does he ever stop to think about anything else?"

Before she could second-guess herself, Irina pushed herself up from the sofa, her steps quiet as she crossed the room. She hesitated for only a moment before wrapping her arms around Astron from behind, her chin resting lightly against his shoulder. The sudden contact made him stiffen slightly, though his posture quickly relaxed.

"What now?" he asked, his voice calm but tinged with faint curiosity.

"Nothing," she replied softly, her voice muffled against the fabric of his coat.

Astron tilted his head slightly, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. "What do you mean, nothing?"

"Do I need a reason?" she countered, her tone carrying a subtle edge of defiance. He was silent for a moment, his sharp eyes studying the city beyond the glass. "...." "Exactly," she murmured, tightening her arms around him slightly.

The two stood there in silence, the faint hum of the city below the only sound that filled the room. Irina closed her eyes, letting out a soft breath as she leaned against him.

She wasn't the type to look for knights in shining armor, nor did she ever want to feel dependent on someone else. Too many times, that trust had been broken. But in this moment, with Astron's steady presence anchoring her, she allowed herself to feel something she rarely let in-protected.

'I don't need this,' she thought, her lips pressing into a thin line. I'm fine on my own. I've always been fine on my own.'

But as the warmth of his presence steadied her, she couldn't deny the small voice whispering in the back of her mind. 'It's also good to feel like someone has your back.' Astron shifted slightly, breaking the silence. "You're unusually quiet," he said, his voice soft but steady.

"Don't ruin it," she muttered, her tone half-joking, half-serious.

His lips twitched faintly, though he didn't say anything more. Irina stayed where she was, letting the moment stretch on, her grip on him firm but not overwhelming. For once, she allowed herself to take comfort in his presence.

\*\*\*\*\*

The small warehouse in the slight edge of the city was dimly lit, its corners cloaked in shadows that seemed to press in on the room's occupants. The air was thick with tension, the silence broken only by the occasional creak of the wooden beams above. Rován Kael sat on a rickety chair, his head in his hands, his usually sharp eyes staring blankly at the floor.

Around him, the four executives of his team paced or leaned against the walls, their expressions varying between frustration and barely concealed fear. The mission had failed—a catastrophic failure that none of them had anticipated. They had been so sure of their plan, so certain of their superiority. But Irina Emberheart had turned the tide with devastating precision, and they had been forced to retreat in disarray. One of the executives, a lean man with a scar running down his cheek, broke the silence. "We should've pulled back the moment the suppression formation started to collapse," he muttered, his voice low but filled with frustration. "We underestimated her. That was our mistake."

"Our mistake?" snapped another, a stocky woman with short-cropped hair. "No, you underestimated her. I told you all—our intel wasn't enough! We had no idea what kind of countermeasures she had prepared."

"Enough!" Rován's voice cut through the bickering like a blade. He lifted his head, his face a mask of exhaustion and grim resolve. His sharp eyes, now tinged with desperation, locked onto the others. "Arguing about what went wrong changes nothing. The mission failed. We failed."

The executives fell silent, the weight of his words settling over them like a shroud. The realization of their situation was undeniable—failure in a mission of this magnitude was not just a setback. For operatives like them, it was a death sentence.

One of the younger executives, a man with a nervous twitch, shifted uneasily. "Rován," he began, his voice hesitant, "what... what are we going to do? We can't go back to the higher-ups. They'll—"

"Kill us," Rován finished flatly. His tone carried no fear, only the cold acceptance of reality. "Returning to them with this failure is signing our death warrants. You all

know that."

The warehouse fell into silence once more, the gravity of their predicament hanging

heavily in the air. The stocky woman broke the silence, her voice laced with anger. "So what's the plan, then? Are we just supposed to sit here and wait for them to find us?"

"No," Rován said sharply, his mind already racing. He leaned forward, resting his

elbows on his knees as he spoke.

Rován Kael leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, the flickering light of the

single lantern casting sharp shadows across his face. His jaw tightened as he replayed the events of the disastrous mission in his mind, his thoughts narrowing in on one

glaring, undeniable truth.

"It wasn't just Irina Emberheart," he muttered, his voice low but laced with bitterness. "That bastard... Astron, or whatever his name is. He was the real problem." The four executives exchanged uneasy glances. They had all seen it-the way Astron had moved through the chaos of the fight, his precision, his speed. He wasn't supposed to be a threat. The intel had described him as a skilled but ultimately unremarkable combatant compared to the overwhelming force of Irina Emberheart.

But that intel had been dead wrong.

"That guy," Rován continued, his voice growing harder, "wasn't just good. He was too good. Faster than any high-ranked hunter I've ever seen. He didn't even make mistakes-none. Every move he made was calculated, efficient, like he'd been trained

for this his whole life."

"He fought like a ghost," the scarred man muttered, shaking his head. "One moment he was there, and the next, he was in the shadows, slipping past every formation we set up. It was like trying to catch smoke with your bare hands."

"Fighting against him was a nightmare," Rován admitted, his tone heavy with frustration. "Even the masters couldn't keep up with him. He turned our entire plan

into a joke."

The stocky woman folded her arms tightly across her chest, her expression grim. "And Irina? She was bad enough on her own. The second the suppression formation collapsed and her flames came back..." She trailed off, her voice tinged with fear. "But you're saying Astron was worse?"

Rován met her gaze, his eyes hard. "Worse. Much worse. Irina Emberheart is dangerous, no doubt about it. But Astron... That guy's a monster. A bigger monster than she is, in my opinion."

The room fell silent again as the weight of his words settled over them. None of them

wanted to admit it, but they had all seen the same thing. Astron wasn't just strong—he was something else entirely, something beyond what they had prepared for.

"It was like he didn't have any weaknesses at all," Rován said, his voice low. "Every

attack we threw at him, he countered. Every move we made, he predicted. It wasn't just skill—it was like he was toying with us."

The younger executive, still visibly shaken, finally spoke up. "Then what do we do? If Astron is really that strong, and he's by Irina Emberheart's side... there's no way we can take them down."

Rován straightened, his gaze hard and unyielding as he looked at each of his subordinates in turn. "We don't," he said firmly. "We leave. We disappear. And we never cross Irina Emberheart or Astron again."

The scarred man frowned, his voice tinged with disbelief. "You're saying we give up?

Just like that?"

"Yes," Rován snapped, his tone brooking no argument. "Because now we know the

truth. Irina alone was bad enough but with Astron at her side? It's suicide. No amount

of preparation, no reinforcements, no tactics will work. They're untouchable." The stocky woman sighed heavily, her shoulders slumping. "So, we run?" "We run," Rován confirmed, his voice resolute. "And we make sure no one knows where

we've gone. We've already lost too much, and if we stay here, we're dead-whether it's

by their hands or the higher-ups."

BOOM!

Suddenly an explosion occurred, covering their senses.

"Indeed.....You are dead."

Chapter 728 165.4 - Fine

The room was filled with a quiet warmth, the kind of comfort that came after exhaustion had been tended to.

Irina sat on the edge of the plush sofa, idly twisting a lock of her fiery hair between her fingers. The faint scent of the meal they'd shared earlier still lingered in the air-a spread of richly seasoned dishes the hotel's five-leaf rating had guaranteed.

Her injuries, though still tender, had been tended to with expert precision by the hotel's private medic. A faint warmth spread through her muscles, courtesy of the salves and potions they'd used, but the deeper exhaustion of the day remained. Astron sat in the armchair nearby, his sharp purple eyes scanning the pages of a small notebook he'd produced from his bag. His calm, focused expression had remained unchanged through their rest and recovery, a steady constant in the turbulence of the day.

Irina glanced at him, her amber eyes narrowing slightly as a thought formed in her mind. 'He's not even relaxing. Does he ever stop?'

Letting out a quiet sigh, she leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "When are we going to leave?" she asked, her tone direct, though not without a tinge of weariness.

Astron's eyes flicked up from the notebook, meeting hers with that piercing intensity she'd come to expect. "Soon," he said simply, closing the notebook and setting it aside. "Are you ready?"

Irina's amber eyes narrowed with determination as she nodded, the lingering ache in her muscles overshadowed by the fiery energy building within her. "Yeah, I'm ready," she said, her tone steady but with an undercurrent of resolve. Her fingers tightened into fists, a faint flicker of flame dancing briefly along her knuckles. The memory of the attack burned in her mind, and the anger she'd suppressed during the chaos now simmered just below the surface.

Astron stood smoothly, his movements deliberate as he adjusted the strap of his bag. His sharp purple eyes flicked to her, studying her briefly before he gave a slight nod. Irina, fueled by the crackling energy of her frustration, pushed herself to her feet, her posture straight and purposeful. She glanced at him, her irritation bubbling to the forefront. "So? How are we going to find them? Do you have some secret tracker or something?"

Astron didn't reply immediately. Instead, he extended a hand toward her, his expression as calm and unreadable as ever. "Come."

Irina blinked, tilting her head slightly as she eyed his outstretched hand. "Hmm?" she muttered, caught off guard by the sudden gesture. "What are you-?"

"Just trust me," Astron said, his tone low but firm.

Still confused but curious, Irina hesitated for only a moment before placing her hand in his. His grip was steady, grounding, yet there was a subtle urgency in his actions that made her heart skip a beat. "Alright, but if this is some weird-"

Before she could finish her thought, Astron stepped closer, his free hand moving to her back as he pulled her into a firm embrace. Irina's eyes widened in surprise, her cheeks flushing as her fiery hair brushed against his coat. "Wh-What are you doing?" she stammered, her voice rising slightly in pitch.

Astron didn't answer. Instead, he turned his sharp gaze toward the window, his hold on her tightening just enough to ensure she wouldn't pull away. Irina barely had time to process what was



happening before he took a step back-and then, with a sudden, fluid motion, leapt toward the open window.

"Wait-!" Irina gasped, her heart lurching as the glass gave way to the night air, the cold rush of wind engulfing them as they plunged downward. The city's glittering lights blurred around them, and for a brief, terrifying moment, all she could do was cling to him, her fiery energy flaring instinctively.

Astron's embrace remained steady, his calm presence anchoring her even as the wind roared past them. Irina's mind raced, but as the initial shock began to ebb, her voice returned. "Astron! What the hell was that?!"

"Hold on," he said simply, his voice carrying a strange calmness even amidst their rapid descent.

Before she could snap back at him, the sensation of falling abruptly shifted. A wave of mana pulsed through the air as Astron extended his hand, channeling energy into a spell.

As they fell through the cool night air, Irina felt a sudden tug, a faint strain on her body. Her amber eyes darted down, and she saw it-a thin, shimmering [Thread] of mana stretching from Astron's hand to the wall of the neighboring building. It pulsed faintly with his energy, taut and controlled, as it drew them toward their target. The tension in the thread snapped suddenly as Astron shifted his grip, swinging them upward with surprising force.

The city lights blurred around them as they arced gracefully through the air, the wind whipping past their faces. Irina's heart pounded, her fingers clutching Astron's coat tightly as the swing carried them higher. Before she could fully process the motion, their feet landed firmly on the flat surface of a nearby rooftop. The impact sent a faint tremor through her legs, but Astron remained steady, his stance as composed as ever. Irina stumbled slightly, breathing heavily as she tried to steady herself. She pushed her fiery hair out of her face, her amber eyes wide with a mix of exhilaration and disbelief. "What the hell was that?!" she gasped, her voice louder than she intended. Astron glanced at her, his expression calm and unflinching. "If we want to move without alerting people, it's better not to notify the hotel reception. There's a chance that information could be leaked."

Irina stared at him, her chest rising and falling as she caught her breath. His explanation was logical, as always, but something about his tone-or maybe the way he'd held her-felt... off. Her gaze lingered on him for a moment longer, searching for something she couldn't quite define. "That's it?" she asked, her voice quieter now, her tone carrying a hint of skepticism.

Astron didn't answer immediately, his sharp purple eyes fixed on the city skyline. "It's the most practical option," he said evenly, but Irina couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to it.

"There's another reason," she thought, her lips pressing into a thin line. "Something not entirely practical." She didn't press him further, though; the moment felt too fleeting, too delicate to probe. Instead, she exhaled softly and shook her head, trying to shake off the lingering mix of emotions.

Without another word, Astron moved to the edge of the roof, glancing down at the streets below. Irina followed, her muscles still humming with residual energy from their abrupt escape. He gestured toward the next rooftop, and with a fluid leap, he cleared the gap effortlessly.

Irina inhaled sharply, then focused her mana. Flames flickered faintly around her feet as she channeled [Body Enhancement], reinforcing her strength and agility. She leapt after him, the faint glow of her flames propelling her forward. Her feet hit the next rooftop, the impact softened by her enhanced body.

They moved like this, jumping from building to building, the city spreading out beneath them like a glittering tapestry. Irina's breaths came in steady bursts as she kept pace with Astron, her enhanced body allowing her to match his movements. "This is... fun?" she realized suddenly, her lips quirking into a faint smile as she landed on another rooftop. The exhilaration of leaping over the city, the wind rushing past her, and the sight of people below moving like tiny ants—it was a thrill unlike anything she'd felt before. "I've flown with my flames before, but this... this is different." By the time they paused on another rooftop, the city stretched out endlessly before them, the lights twinkling like stars against the dark canvas of the night. Irina stood beside Astron, her chest heaving slightly but her amber eyes alight with energy. "This is insane," she muttered, though there was a spark of excitement in her tone.

Astron glanced at her, his sharp eyes catching the faint amusement in hers. "You're keeping up," he said, almost as if it surprised him.

Irina smirked, crossing her arms as she leaned against a vent. "What, you didn't think I could? I'm not some fragile little princess."

"No," Astron replied, his voice calm but with a faint edge of humor. "You're not."

For a moment, the tension of the mission seemed to ease, replaced by the quiet exhilaration of the night. Then, without a word, Astron turned his gaze back to the horizon, his focus shifting to the task ahead. Irina followed his gaze, her smirk fading into a determined expression as the weight of their mission settled back into place. "That is the place," Astron said, his voice low and steady, cutting through the stillness.

of the night.

Irina blinked, her amber eyes snapping to the large structure below them. The warehouse loomed in the shadows, its rusted metal siding reflecting faint streaks of moonlight. It sat on the outskirts of the city, the surrounding area eerily quiet, as if deliberately chosen for privacy.

'Wait... already?' Irina thought, realization dawning. They had been leaping and

running across rooftops for what felt like only moments, the thrill of the journey having completely distracted her, 7 was planning to observe how he'd figure out the enemy's location! But I forgot!' She glanced at Astron, irritation mingling with surprise as her curiosity bubbled to the surface.

"Really?" she asked, her tone edged with disbelief as she gestured toward the

warehouse.

"Yes," Astron replied, his sharp purple eyes locked on the building below. His expression was unreadable, but there was an unmistakable confidence in his tone. Irina tilted her head slightly, studying the warehouse more closely. It was large and weathered, with faint signs of activity-a few crates stacked haphazardly near the entrance, a faint hum of machinery coming from within. The location felt deliberate, almost too perfect. She smirked, crossing her arms as a flicker of flame danced along her fingertips. "Then... can I go in?"

Astron turned his gaze to her, his expression calm but subtly appraising. "Are you asking, or are you telling me?"

She laughed softly, her smirk widening as she gestured toward the desolate surroundings. "Look at this place," she said, her tone dripping with confidence. "It's almost like they're inviting me in. No civilians around, no distractions... just enough

space for me to let loose."

Astron gave a faint nod, his lips twitching slightly as if in amusement. "Of course," he

said simply.

That was all the encouragement Irina needed. She took a step toward the edge of the rooftop, the faint glow of her flames illuminating her determined expression. The frustration she'd carried all day, the anger at having her plans ruined, and the thrill of their rooftop chase all coalesced into a fiery energy that burned in her chest.

Her smirk deepened as she glanced back at Astron. "Watch my back, will you?"

""

Without another word, Irina leapt from the rooftop, flames igniting around her as she descended toward the warehouse. The rush of wind whipped through her hair, but her focus remained sharp. Her feet hit the ground with a burst of fire, the force of her

landing cracking the concrete beneath her as she straightened, her flames flickering around her like a living aura.

She glanced at the warehouse door, her smirk never wavering. 'Let's see how ready

these guys really are."

Behind her, Astron watched from above, his calm gaze fixed on the scene below. The hunt was far from over, but for now, it was Irina's turn to take the lead.

Chapter 729: Chapter 166.1 - Interrogation

"Indeed.....You are dead."

BOOM!

The explosion rocked the small warehouse, shaking its flimsy walls and filling the space with smoke and debris. Roan and the executives were thrown off balance, their hands instinctively reaching for their weapons as their ears rang from the force of the blast.

Through the smoke, a figure emerged, cloaked in an orange aura that shimmered like molten sunlight. Her red, short hair floated weightlessly, as if carried by an unseen wind, and flames coiled around her hands, licking the air with deadly intent.

"Irina Emberheart!" one of the executives choked out, his voice a mixture of disbelief and terror.

Irina's amber eyes burned with cold fury, her steps measured and deliberate as she advanced into the room. The firelight around her cast dancing shadows against the walls, amplifying her already commanding presence.

"How did you find us?" Rován demanded, his voice steadier than he felt. His mind raced for an escape, for any chance to salvage the situation. But deep down, he already knew there was

none.

Irina tilted her head slightly, her expression almost bored. "Did you really think you could run from me?" she asked, her voice low and cutting. "After what you tried to pull at the museum? You should've known better."

Her words sent a chill through the room, and Rován clenched his jaw, his gaze darting toward his subordinates. We need time, he thought desperately. Anything to figure out a way out of this. "Listen," the scarred man said quickly, stepping forward with his hands raised. "We-we didn't mean for things to escalate like that. It was just business. We were hired-"

"Business?" Irina interrupted, her voice laced with venom. Her hand shot forward, and a whip of fire lashed out, striking the ground inches from the man's feet. The flames roared upward, forming a wall that forced him back. "Do you think I care about your excuses?"

The stocky woman, her face pale, tried to edge toward the door, but Irina's sharp gaze snapped to her. With a flick of her wrist, another burst of fire erupted, cutting off the woman's escape route.

The stocky woman, her face pale, tried to edge toward the door, but Irina's sharp gaze snapped to her. With a flick of her wrist, another burst of fire erupted, cutting off the woman's escape route.

"You don't get to walk away from this," Irina said coldly, stepping further into the room. The flames surrounding her seemed to grow brighter, hotter, as if feeding on her anger. "Not after what you tried to do."

Rovan's hand moved to the hilt of his weapon, his mind racing. "You're making a mistake," he said, trying to keep his voice calm. "Killing us will only bring more trouble to your doorstep. We're not the real threat."

Irina laughed, a cold, mirthless sound that sent a shiver through the room. "Killing you isn't the goal. No, I want you alive-for now. But you will suffer."

Before anyone could react, Irina moved. She was a blur of motion, her flames surging forward in waves that seemed to consume the very air. The first executive tried to raise a defense, activating an artifact on his wrist, but the fire overwhelmed him, sending him crashing to the ground with a scream.

The stocky woman lunged for her weapon, but Irina was faster. A blast of fire struck her square in the chest, throwing her against the wall, where she crumpled in a heap, coughing and gasping for air.

Rovan drew his blade, a finely crafted weapon etched with anti-magic runes, and charged at Irina with a desperate cry. But she sidestepped him effortlessly, her movements fluid and precise. She spun, her hand blazing with fire, and slammed it into his back. The impact sent him sprawling, his weapon clattering uselessly to the ground.

"You're outmatched," Irina said, her voice as scorching as the flames around her. "You never stood a chance."

Just like that, she had unleashed her flames....

\*\*\*\*\*

One by one, the remaining executives fell. The scarred man tried to fight back, his dagger glinting in the firelight, but Irina disarmed him with ease, a jet of flame sending him sprawling. The younger executive, trembling, dropped to his knees, his hands raised in surrender, but even he was engulfed in a ring of fire that left him paralyzed with fear. Within moments, the room was filled with the acrid smell of smoke and scorched wood. Fire roared around the warehouse, casting flickering shadows over the defeated figures of Rovan and his team. They lay scattered across the floor, bruised, burned, and utterly beaten. Irina stood over them, her flames receding slightly but still crackling with energy. Her gaze swept across the room, her expression one of cold satisfaction.

The acrid smell of smoke and charred wood filled the air, a testament to the destruction she had unleashed. She took a deep breath, her chest rising and falling as she surveyed her handiwork.

'Not bad,' she thought, a faint smirk tugging at her lips. Satisfaction bloomed in her chest, but it was fleeting. Her flames dimmed slightly, retreating to faint embers along her fingertips, but the fury in her hazel eyes hadn't abated. 'It's not enough. Not yet.'

Her gaze swept over the fallen figures. They were alive, but barely-groaning, coughing, and too battered to fight back. Rován, the apparent leader whose name she had heard in the midst of the fight, lay slumped against a crate, his weapon knocked from his grip and his breaths labored. His eyes burned with defiance even as he winced in pain. The others weren't in much better shape: bruised, burned, and utterly beaten.

Irina's smirk faded as the weight of unanswered questions pressed down on her. "There's no way they pulled this off without help. No way they had the resources or the foresight to predict I'd be here. Even my mother didn't know I'd be in this city, let alone the museum.'

Her thoughts sharpened, anger flaring anew as she stepped closer to Rován. 'Someone's backing them. Someone with power, resources, and enough audacity to think they could take me down.'

Rován's head tilted up slightly as she approached, his breathing ragged but his gaze defiant. Irina crouched in front of him, her flames flaring briefly in her palm before she snuffed them out with a flick of her fingers. She leaned in, her voice low and dangerous. "You've got one chance to make this easy for yourself, Rován. Who's pulling your strings?"

Rován's lips twisted into a pained smirk. "You think I'll just—"

Before he could finish, Irina's hand shot forward, her flames reigniting in a searing whip that licked dangerously close to his face. He flinched, his defiance faltering for the briefest

moment.

"Wrong answer," Irina said coldly, her flames retreating but still pulsing in her palm. "You're not in a position to play games with me. You've already lost. Now, talk." Rován's jaw tightened, his eyes flicking to the others in the room as if searching for some kind of escape or support. But the sight of his incapacitated team offered no hope. He sighed, his defiance giving way to reluctant pragmatism. "Fine," he muttered, his voice hoarse. "But I

don't know much."

"Try harder," Irina snapped, her flames surging again as she straightened to her full height. "Your equipment, your tactics—someone gave you the tools to come after me. And they knew exactly where I'd be. Who was it?"

Rovan swallowed hard, the heat from her flames forcing him to shield his face. "We... we were hired. A contact, anonymous. They never gave us their name, just a token—a sigil."

Irina's eyes narrowed. "A sigil?"

Rovan nodded weakly, fumbling in his coat pocket. He produced a small, scorched medallion, its surface engraved with an intricate design of flames encircling a crescent moon. Irina snatched it from his hand, her brows furrowing as she turned it over in her palm. The metal was warm to the touch, and a faint trace of mana pulsed within it.

"This," she said, her voice low. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know!" Rovan said quickly, fear creeping into his voice. "It was the only thing they left us. Instructions came through encrypted scrolls, and payments were deposited through untraceable accounts. We never met them face-to-face."

Irina's flames flared again, her frustration boiling over. "You're telling me you risked everything on the word of someone you've never met? How stupid are you?"

"We didn't have a choice!" Rovan protested, his voice cracking. "They knew too much about us—about me, my team. It wasn't a job we could refuse."

Irina stared down at him, her fury simmering as her thoughts raced. "This wasn't just business

for them. Whoever hired these idiots made sure they couldn't back out. But why go through all this trouble? What's their endgame?"



Her gaze swept over the other executives, her lips curling into a cold smirk as her flames danced brighter around her. "Looks like I'll have to try my luck with the rest of your friends,"

she said, her voice laced with menace.

One of the other executives, the younger one who had dropped to his knees earlier, whimpered audibly. "P-please," he stammered, his hands trembling as he raised them in surrender. "I'll tell you what I know! Just don't... don't burn me!"

Irina turned toward him, her smirk widening as she took a slow step closer. "Good," she said,

her flames licking the air menacingly. "Because I'm not done yet."

And so, with her flames crackling like a predator circling its prey, Irina began her interrogation in earnest, determined to uncover the truth behind the attack-and to ensure

that those who dared target her would regret it.

The acrid scent of smoke and scorched metal filled the air, punctuated by the whimpers and pleas of her battered captives. She leaned over the younger man, her flames licking dangerously close to his trembling hands.

"Start talking," she demanded, her voice low and cutting. "Who hired you? What else do you know?"

"I-I don't know their name!" he stammered, his eyes darting nervously between her and the still-burning embers near his feet. "They gave us instructions through encrypted scrolls. Payment was guaranteed, and there was no way to track them."

Irina narrowed her eyes, her flames flaring briefly before dimming again. "Pathetic," she muttered, turning to the stocky woman who still clutched her side from an earlier blow. Irina crouched in front of her, tilting her head slightly as she studied the woman's face. "And you? Do you have anything more useful to say? Or are you as worthless as the rest of

your team?"

The woman swallowed hard, her pale face streaked with soot. "We didn't have a choice," she rasped. "They knew where to find us, knew about our families. They said if we didn't do this,

they'd-" She hesitated, her voice breaking.

"They'd what?" Irina snapped, her flames crackling impatiently.

"They'd kill them," the woman whispered, her eyes squeezing shut. "My son, my mother...

they made it clear we couldn't say no."

She was left with no clues....

Or was she?

## Chapter 730: Chapter 166.2 - Interrogation

Irina released him with a shove, her flames receding as she took a step back. She clenched her fists at her sides, her nails digging into her palms as frustration boiled within her. 'No name. No face. Just the sigil.' The same sigil she now carried in her pocket, a frustratingly ambiguous clue.

Her gaze swept the room one last time, falling on each battered figure in turn. Despite her best efforts, despite her flames and fury, she'd found nothing. No threads to follow. No names to chase. Only fear and uncertainty.

"This is useless," she muttered under her breath, her flames flickering out completely as she turned away. Her fiery hair settled against her back, no longer buoyed by the aura of her power. She clenched her jaw, trying to swallow the bitter taste of disappointment.

From the shadows near the warehouse entrance, Astron stepped forward, his calm presence a stark contrast to the destruction around them. His sharp purple eyes scanned the room before settling on Irina.

"Nothing?" he asked quietly, already knowing the answer.

Irina exhaled sharply, her shoulders stiffening. "Nothing," she admitted, her voice tight. "Whoever's behind this covered their tracks too well. All we've got is that damn sigil."

Astron stood silently for a moment, his sharp purple eyes fixed on Irina as she fumed, her shoulders tense and her fists clenched at her sides. Then, with a slow, deliberate shake of his head, he let out a faint sigh.

"Is this the first time you've done this?" he asked, his voice calm but carrying a weight that immediately caught her attention.

Irina turned to him, her amber eyes narrowing in irritation. "Done what?" she snapped, her tone edged with lingering frustration.

"Interrogated someone," Astron clarified, his gaze unwavering.

Irina blinked, her irritation faltering for a moment. "Well... yeah," she admitted, her voice defensive. "It's not like I go around interrogating people every day. I'm not some shadow operative. And as a member of the Emberheart family, I don't exactly need to do this kind of thing. Why does it matter?"

Astron nodded slightly, his expression as calm and unreadable as ever. "It shows."

Irina's eyes narrowed further, her frustration flaring anew. "What's that supposed to mean?" "It means," Astron said evenly, taking a step closer to her, "they're lying to you."

Irina's mouth opened, but the retort on her tongue faltered as her mind raced to catch up. She stared at him, the weight of his words sinking in. "What... what are you talking about? How can you even tell?"

Astron gestured subtly toward the group of battered captives sprawled across the warehouse floor. "Their body language, their responses, the inconsistencies. It's obvious they're just lying to you."

Astron's sharp gaze remained fixed on the captives, his calm demeanor unshaken despite the destruction surrounding them. "Irina," he began, his tone measured but firm, "operatives like these don't walk into situations like this without contingencies. Before their operations, they establish a

network of misleading information, specifically designed to misdirect anyone inexperienced in extracting the truth."

Irina frowned, her frustration giving way to a flicker of curiosity. "Misleading information? You're saying they planned to lie to me from the start?"

"Exactly," Astron replied, stepping closer to the group. "The moment they realized you weren't experienced in interrogation, they knew they could play you. They've been feeding you pre-crafted scenarios, designed to distract and confuse."

He crouched slightly, his gray eyes narrowing as he pointed to the younger man who had trembled and begged for mercy. "Him, for instance. Notice how his trembling increased when you asked for details about the sigil, but not when you threatened his life? That's a calculated reaction. He's trying to seem more terrified of you than he is of revealing the truth, which means he's hiding something."

The younger man's eyes widened, his breathing quickening as he stammered, "I-I'm not lying! I swear!"

Astron ignored him, his gaze shifting to the stocky woman. "And her. She claimed they threatened her family, but she hesitated when mentioning her son and mother. That hesitation wasn't fear-it was an adjustment. She was trying to remember the cover story she'd been given."

The woman's face paled further, and her lips tightened as she glanced nervously at Rován.

Astron straightened, his focus now on Rován, who had remained silent, his jaw clenched tightly. "And you," Astron said coldly. "You've been the quietest of the group, trying to gauge when to intervene. That's because you're the leader, and you know that if you break, the rest will follow."

Rován's eyes flashed with defiance, but there was a subtle shift in his posture-a tightening of his jaw, a twitch in his hand-that didn't escape Astron's notice. Astron's gaze sharpened further, and he took a deliberate step forward. "You've all been lying. But the truth won't stay hidden for long."

Suddenly, Rován's eyes widened, and his head jerked forward slightly. Astron reacted instantly, moving faster than anyone in the room could register. His hand shot out, gripping Rován's jaw and forcing it open. With a sharp tug, Astron pulled a small, silver capsule from the man's mouth, holding it up for Irina to see.

"Poison capsule," Astron said calmly, his voice carrying an edge of cold precision. "Standard protocol for operatives who know too much."

The other captives reacted in panic, their eyes darting toward each other as two more of them moved to bite down on their own capsules. But Astron was already in motion. His hands blurred as he intercepted them, prying their mouths open with practiced ease and retrieving the capsules before they could act. He tossed the capsules onto the ground, crushing them underfoot with a deliberate motion.

The room fell into an eerie silence, broken only by the captives' labored breathing. Rován glared at Astron, his expression a mix of fear and rage. "You... you're not normal," he spat, his voice hoarse.

Astron held Rován's furious gaze, his sharp purple eyes unwavering as he spoke with chilling precision. "The term 'normal' is not something the likes of you can use," he said coldly, his tone laced with disdain. He stepped back slightly, tossing the crushed remnants of the poison capsules aside. "To make people like you talk, you need more than threats or brute force. You need precision."

He turned to Irina, his gaze softening ever so slightly. "Do you want to watch what happens next? It won't be a sight that... normal people enjoy."

Irina's amber eyes narrowed as she crossed her arms, her flames flickering faintly around her fingertips. "I want to see," she said firmly. "And I want to participate."

Astron tilted his head slightly, studying her with a quiet intensity. "Are you sure? What we're about to do is different from any fight you've had before. This isn't a battle of strength or flames. It's a battle of will."

"I've seen enough in my life not to flinch at something like this," Irina replied, her tone steady. Her fiery gaze didn't waver as she stepped closer. "If it means getting answers, I'm in."

"I'm not fragile, Astron."

A faint curl tugged at the corner of his lips, though his expression remained otherwise unreadable. "Don't blame me later for not asking."

Without further warning, Astron moved with deliberate precision, crouching in front of

Rovan. His presence seemed to darken, his calm demeanor taking on an unsettling edge that made the air feel heavier. The other captives froze, their eyes wide as they watched him with a mixture of fear and dread.

Astron spoke softly, his voice calm but carrying an undeniable weight. "Here's how this works. You talk, and things stay simple. You don't..." He let the words hang in the air, his

sharp eyes narrowing slightly. "And we find other ways."

Rovan sneered, though there was a flicker of unease in his gaze. "You think you scare me?"

Astron's smirk returned, colder this time. "Not yet."

He raised his hand, a faint pulse of mana coalescing around his fingers. Mana twisted unnaturally around him, curling and coiling like living tendrils. The room seemed to darken further, the air growing colder as the mana had taken a physical "laser" form, expanding, brushing against the captives like icy fingers.

Irina watched with a mixture of fascination and unease.

The light wasn't like her flames-it was cold, almost ethereal, with a deadly precision that seemed to defy the natural order. It brushed past the captives, leaving faint trails of frost in its wake, the temperature in the room plummeting with every second. Irina's amber eyes narrowed as she watched, her gaze fixated on the strange energy. "The mana?" she thought, a flicker of confusion crossing her mind. 'It's similar to what I can do with compressed fire, but... this isn't a basic heat. It's rather space-ish?'

She pushed the thought aside as Astron began, his voice cutting through the oppressive silence. "Let's start simple," he said, his tone calm but unyielding. He crouched lower, his

piercing purple eyes locking onto Rovan's with an intensity that made even Irina take notice. "Who gave you the sigil?"

Rovan sneered, his earlier defiance returning as he glared up at Astron. "I already told you, I

don't-"

Before he could finish, one of the blue mana tendrils shot forward, stopping just short of his neck. The beam hissed faintly, releasing a puff of cold air that made Rován flinch despite

himself.

"Try again," Astron said, his voice steady. "This time, without wasting my time."

Irina crossed her arms, her fiery hair glowing faintly in the dim light as she leaned against the wall, observing the scene. Her frustration had given way to a tense curiosity as she watched Astron work. There was something unsettling about the way he moved—calm, deliberate, and entirely without hesitation.

Rován's sneer faltered as the tendril pressed closer, the frost creeping along his skin. "I-I told you everything I know!" he stammered, his bravado crumbling under the cold precision of

Astron's gaze.

"You're lying," Astron said simply, his voice devoid of emotion. "And you're bad at it."

Another tendril lashed out, striking the ground inches from Rován's knee. The floor cracked under the impact, a spiderweb of frost spreading outward. The sound echoed ominously through the warehouse, drawing a gasp from one of the other captives.

Irina shifted slightly, her amber eyes narrowing as she watched Astron.

'This.....He really...'

It was the first time she was seeing such a side of him, and in fact, it was scary....

\*\*\*\*\*

"It was Hawkins! Hawkins..... They were our employer...." And they finally got the answer that they were looking for.....